Wherever you're hiding

—"I built the mask so well, that when I finally took it off

Even I didn't recognize what was underneath."

The weekend passed the way weekends passed for people who were trying to forget: slowly.

Saturday moved like syrup—thick, heavy, each hour clinging to the next, refusing to separate into discrete units, the entire day a single, undifferentiated mass of time that Est occupied without inhabiting. Sunday was worse. Sunday was the day that existed specifically to remind you that Monday was coming and that Monday would require you to be a person again, a functional person, a person who answered emails and maintained eye contact and did not stand in the shower for forty-five minutes staring at the tile grout and thinking about the weight of a body on his and the sound of a voice asking are you too drunk?

The apartment was a vacuum of silence.

His apartment. The good apartment. The ultra-modern, gallery-like, meticulously organized apartment in the quiet, new-money district—the apartment that smelled of vetiver and wet asphalt and cold iris, the apartment that was climate-controlled and soundproofed and designed, by Est himself, with the architectural precision of a person who used his living space the way he used his cologne: as a defense.

The silence was perfect. The silence was what he had built this space for—the absence of noise, the absence of intrusion, the absence of the world's relentless, exhausting, empathy-draining demand to be felt. The blackout curtains were drawn. The noise-canceling headphones sat on their marble pedestal by the door, waiting, offering their promise of additional silence, as if the existing silence were insufficient, as if there were a deeper silence beneath the silence, and the headphones could take him there.

He didn't put them on. The silence was already too loud.

Est stood on his balcony.

The humidity of Bangkok was already beginning to press against his fair skin—the wet, heavy, subtropical air that arrived in the morning and stayed until night and made everything feel like the inside of a mouth. His skin would need extra care today.

He took a long drag of a cigarette.

The smoke filled his lungs—warm, acrid, the familiar, forbidden taste of the habit he had hidden from Kai for three years and had continued hiding out of muscle memory, out of the ingrained assumption that his pleasures were contraband, that

his authentic self was something to be smuggled past the authorities of his own life. Kai was gone. Had been gone for months. And still Est smoked in secret, on his own balcony, in his own apartment, hiding from no one, the performance of concealment continuing even after the audience had left.

The smoke curled out of his mouth and dissipated into the smog, joining the gray-brown haze that hung over the city like a permanent filter, softening the edges of everything, making the skyline look like a photograph that had been left in the sun too long.

He watched the smoke dissipate into the smog. Two kinds of poison, merging. The personal and the environmental. The chosen and the inherited.

His agency would lose their minds if they knew.

The cigarettes. The warehouse. The night that had happened and that he was now, standing on this balcony in the harsh light of a Saturday afternoon, trying to convince himself had not happened—or had happened but didn't matter, or had mattered but shouldn't, or should but couldn't be allowed to.

"It was a hallucination." he told himself.

He said it out loud. To the smog. To the skyline. To the cigarette between his fingers and the balcony railing beneath his elbows and the empty apartment behind him. His jaw tightened into the perfect, strong line the cameras loved—the jawline that had launched campaigns, the jawline that was architecture, the jawline that said I am in control even when the person behind it was not.

"The warehouse was a fever dream."

His voice was flat. Controlled. The voice of the model, the voice of the press conference, the voice that Dana had trained and the industry had polished and the years had hardened into something that sounded like authority but felt like absence.

"The touch was just a chemical reaction to too much alcohol."

The touch.

The word detonated silently. The word collapsed inward, pulling everything with it, the memory rushing into the vacuum: hands on his face, on his hair, on his neck. Hands that mapped rather than grabbed. The forehead kiss. The voice—warm, deep, genuine—asking is everything alright? before continuing. The specific, unbearable tenderness of a person who was paying attention.

Kai had touched him. Kai had touched him constantly, casually, the comfortable physical vocabulary of a long-term relationship—the hand on the small of the back at events, the arm around the shoulder in photos, the kiss on the cheek that was

directed not at the cheek but at the camera behind the cheek. But had that been touch? Or had it been something else—possession, performance, the maintenance of an image rather than the acknowledgment of a person?

The difference was in the asking.

Is everything alright? Are you too drunk?

Kai had never asked. Kai had assumed. Kai had moved through their shared physical space with the confident, unquestioning certainty of a person who believed that consent was implied by proximity, that wanting was the same as being wanted, that touching someone who was yours required no more permission than touching your own skin.

The stranger had asked.

The stranger—the faceless, tattoo-backed, voice-warm stranger who had carried Est's loneliness out of the warehouse and into the apartment and had held it, and had asked, and had continued only when the asking was answered.

He finished the cigarette. He crushed it on the balcony railing—the cherry dying against the metal, the small, orange, living thing extinguished by the deliberate application of pressure—and he went inside.

He needed to go back. He needed to go back to living his life. The actual life. The scheduled, managed, climate-controlled life that existed in the calendar on his phone and the contracts in Dana's folder and the campaigns that required his face and his body and his jawline and his silence.

He needed to forget the night: the warehouse, the fire, the blue wristband, the people who had looked at him and seen a person instead of a product. He needed to forget Hong's monotone voice saying upstairs as if the word were a gift. Nut's firm handshake and the way his serious face transformed when he smiled. Tui's warm baritone carrying effortlessly across the outdoor space, the camera in his hand like an extension of his arm. Lego's chuckle—bright, musical, the chuckle of a person who communicated in exclamation points and who had told Est to eat ice and had been right, the ice was good. The metal chairs. The wild grass growing between concrete slabs. The food trucks. The graffiti on the warehouse walls. And that entire night—messy, noisy, honest, overwhelming, and beautiful—which had felt like being alive in a way his normal life had never experienced.

He needed to forget the boy.

The boy he didn't remember. The boy whose face wouldn't resolve in his memory, whose name existed somewhere in the blurred sequence of the night but could not be extracted from the blur. The tattoo on the back. The hands that asked before touching. The voice that said you're beautiful and meant it—meant it in the way

that a person who saw beauty in overlooked things meant it, in the way that was not about the jawline or the campaign or the product but about the person.

He needed to forget how good it felt.

He needed to go back to normal. To hiding his cigarettes. To standing in rooms full of people who saw surfaces. To going out and posing for a camera that saw him as an object. That was what he wanted. To forget. To reset. To return to the factory settings of Est Sangaworawong, International Darling, the face that sold things, the body that was positioned and photographed and touched by strangers who were paid to touch him and who did not ask before touching because asking was not part of the workflow.

He showered. He did his skincare—the routine meticulous, the products expensive, each one applied in the correct order with the correct pressure, the ritual not vanity but maintenance, the upkeep of the asset, the polishing of the surface that the world had paid for and expected to see. He dressed. The turtleneck. The armor. The dark colors. The fabric against his skin like a second wall, the collar rising to meet his jaw, covering the spot beneath the jawline where the lips had been, the spot that no one was supposed to reach.

He put on the cologne. The commercial one. The one that smelled like the brand and not like himself—the one that the campaign required him to wear at events, the scent that had been designed by a marketing team to communicate accessible luxury and masculine refinement and that communicated, to Est, nothing. The scent was a uniform. The scent was a costume. The scent was the olfactory equivalent of the turtleneck: coverage.

He looked in the mirror.

The face looked back—controlled, precise, beautiful, empty. The jawline. The dark eyes. The jet-black hair. The turtleneck. The modern, sophisticated look that had sold perfume and watches and clothing and the idea that a person could be this perfect, this contained, this entirely, immaculately under control.

Factory settings restored.

He stood on the pedestal and he was the product.

He put the noise-canceling headphones on. No music. Just the silence. The manufactured, technological silence that blocked the world's frequency and replaced it with nothing—the nothing that was, for Est, the closest thing to safety.

By noon, the internet had done what it did best: turned a private moment into a public spectacle.

A photo.

One of the hundred people at the party had taken a photo. Not a good photo—not the composed, intentional, artistically considered photograph that William or Tui would have taken. A phone photo. Quick. Thoughtless. The kind of photo that existed not as art but as ammunition, taken not to preserve a moment but to broadcast it.

In it, Est and Hong stood side by side.

The setting was the company party—the glass, the marble, the careful lighting. Hong was holding his beer, the bottle casual in his hand, his posture the deliberate, confrontational slouch of a person who had decided that this space was not worth standing up straight for. Est held his glass of water—because at that point in the evening, it had still been water, before the night had turned into something else. Est, in his expensive clothes that met the standards—the crimson turtleneck, the fitted trousers, the shoes that cost more than some people's rent—was perfect. Untouchable. Solitary, professional. A marble column in a marble room.

Hong beside him was a stark contrast. The leather vest. The silver chains. The distressed boots. The gray hair catching the institutional lighting and turning it into something subversive.

The photo was a study in opposites. The internet recognized it immediately: the visual binary that was the internet's favorite structural device: this vs. that. Expectation vs. reality. The world you're told to want vs. the world that actually exists. Clean vs. messy. Approved vs. unapproved. The Prince vs. the Black Sheep.

The photo went viral.

The virality was rapid—the speed of it not human but algorithmic, the image propelled by the specific, mechanical logic of a system that rewarded engagement and defined engagement as reaction and did not distinguish between admiration and outrage because both generated clicks and clicks were the only currency.

The image was cropped. Filtered. Memed into oblivion. The original context—two people at a party, standing near a window, the proximity accidental, the moment unremarkable—was stripped away with the efficiency of a machine that did not value context, that valued engagement, that ran on the fuel of reaction and produced the exhaust of opinion.

The captions were brutal in their humor.

"When you have a gala at 8 but a bar fight at 9."

"Est followed the assignment; Hong didn't even know there was a test."

"Why is the agency still letting the 'Black Sheep' hang out with our Prince?"

Our Prince. The possessive pronoun. The internet claiming ownership. The collective, anonymous, algorithmic voice saying: we own this face. We paid for this face. This face belongs to us, and we will decide who stands next to it.

The outrage said: Hong was contaminating Est's brand. Hong's scuffed leather and silver chains and smoldering cigarette and casual defiance were wrong—wrong for the aesthetic, wrong for the image, wrong for the carefully constructed, expensively maintained, commercially optimized surface that Est presented to the world and that the world had agreed to purchase. Hong was the smudge on the glass. Hong was the crack in the marble. Hong was the evidence that the Prince was capable of standing next to someone who was not a prince, and the evidence was unacceptable because it implied that the Prince was a person, and persons were messy, and mess was not part of the brand.

Back in his apartment, Est broke his own rule and opened the app.

He had rules about social media. Rules designed by Dana, enforced by habit, maintained by the specific, clinical discipline of a person who understood that the internet was not a place but a machine, and the machine did not care about him, and engaging with the machine was a form of self-harm that was socially acceptable only because it was universal.

He opened it anyway.

He scrolled through the captions. The jokes. The outrage. The memes—his face cropped, Hong's face cropped, the two faces arranged and rearranged and captioned and recaptioned and used, the faces not belonging to them anymore but to the algorithm, the faces as raw material for the manufacture of content.

To the internet, it was a mismatch. A branding problem. A glamorous prince contaminated by the wrong company.

He looked at the photo one more time.

He looked at himself—the crimson turtleneck, the halo of institutional lighting, the marble expression. He looked perfect. He looked expensive. He looked alone. The aloneness was visible—not in the posture, not in the expression, not in any single, identifiable feature, but in the totality, in the cumulative effect of a person who had been trained to fill a room without being in it and who was, in this photograph, demonstrating that skill with the unconscious mastery of years of practice.

He looked at Hong.

Hong looked real. Even in a viral scandal. Even cropped and filtered and memed. Even reduced to the punchline of a joke about wardrobe malfunctions and bar fights. Even in the flat, compressed, context-stripped medium of a phone screen. Hong looked like a person. Hong looked like someone who had made a decision

about who he was and had implemented the decision without consulting anyone else and was standing in the result of that decision with the specific, immovable, rock-solid certainty of a person who had nothing to prove.

Hong looked like he knew exactly who he was.

Est looked at himself again. The Prince. The product. The face that sold things.

He closed the app.

He put the phone down.

He put the headphones back on.

The agency's silence on Monday morning was worse than anger.

It was the kind of silence institutions used when they were waiting for you to fix your own scandal before they had to get their hands dirty—the corporate version of a parent standing in a doorway with their arms crossed, watching their child realize they'd done something wrong, the silence not an absence of communication but a communication in itself, saying: we know. We're watching. We're waiting to see what you do next.

Est stood in a glass-walled conference room on the fourth floor. The glass was the agency's signature architectural element—transparency as ideology, the walls saying we have nothing to hide while hiding everything behind the specific, translucent opacity of corporate culture, where visibility was not the same as honesty and being seen was not the same as being known.

Dana was beside him. Seated. Her notebook open on the table, pen lined neatly beside it—the arrangement a small, controlled geometry, the pen parallel to the notebook's edge, the handwriting inside small and precise. Dana's composure was professional—the composure of a woman who had managed models for fifteen years and had seen crises that made a viral photo look like a weather report.

She slid a tablet toward him.

The photo again. His face. Hong's face. The mismatch. The memes. The engagement metrics climbing in the corner of the screen like a fever reading.

"Eighty thousand shares," Dana said. Neutral. Not impressed, not alarmed—informational, the voice of a person who was presenting data and allowing the data to speak for itself. "Two hundred thousand comments. Trending in three countries."

Est looked at the screen. His own face stared back. Perfect. Expensive. Alone.

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

"Do you think they'll say anything to Hong?" Est asked.

Dana looked at him. The look lasted a beat—The question surprised her. Not because it was unexpected, but because it was the first question. Not what happens to my brand? Not will the sponsors pull out? Not how do we make this go away? But what about Hong?

"Will they target his contract because he was with me?"

"The sponsors are worried about the clash in branding," she said. Carefully. Each word placed. "They see a Prince and a Rebel and don't think they belong in the same campaign." She paused. The pause was not dramatic. "But I'm not them."

Est looked at her.

"You look different in this photo." Dana said.

"Different how?"

"Like you're about to leave," she said. "Not the party. Everything."

The words hit harder than he expected. Est's jaw tightened. The professional reflex. The armor engaging.

"That's a dramatic reading." he said.

"It's an accurate reading." Dana's voice was gentle now. Genuinely gentle—not the gentleness of a manager managing a model's emotions, but the gentleness of a person who had watched Est for years and had accumulated enough observations to understand that the distance between who Est was and who Est performed being was growing, and the gap was becoming dangerous. "So I'm asking you again. Not the model. Not the brand. You. What do you want to do?"

The pronoun shift was deliberate. You. Not we. Not the team. Not the agency. You. The individual. The person. The human being inside the turtleneck.

"Will they target Hong?"

"His manager has been furious since Saturday."

The answer sharpened something inside him. A blade turning. The empathy—the specific, sponge-like, uncontrollable empathy that was both his gift and his exhaustion—absorbing the information and converting it immediately into feeling: anger, protectiveness, the sudden, fierce, irrational certainty that a person he had met twice was being treated unfairly and that the unfairness was, somehow, his responsibility.

"She blames him?"

"She sees him as a problem to manage, not a person to support."

The sentence echoed. It echoed because it was familiar—because Est recognized the dynamic, because he had lived inside it, because the machinery of the modeling industry was built on exactly this transaction: the conversion of people into problems, the conversion of problems into solutions, the conversion of solutions into revenue.

"They're waiting," Dana said. Her voice was neutral—not cold, not warm, just professional. The voice she used when she was presenting options rather than making recommendations. "The sponsors. The agency executives. The PR team. They're all waiting for a statement."

"What kind of statement?"

"The kind that makes this go away."

Dana tapped the tablet, scrolling through a document that Est recognized as a draft press release—the language corporate, the sentences smooth, the meaning varnished with the specific, translucent coating of PR language that said everything and communicated nothing.

"Something about mentorship. About you guiding a junior model through the complexities of industry events. Something that frames the photo as professional rather than personal."

"That's a lie."

"Yes," Dana said. Simply. Without argument. The acknowledgment of a fact. "They want you to distance yourself," she said. "They see a Prince and a Rebel, and they don't think they belong in the same frame. The sponsors are worried about the clash in branding. They're worried that Hong's aesthetic will contaminate yours."

"Contaminate."

The word sat in Est's mouth like something rotten. The word was a judgment disguised as a diagnosis, a moral evaluation dressed in marketing language, the specific, insidious vocabulary of an industry that used words like contaminate and brand alignment and optics to mean this person is wrong and you should not be seen with them.

"Their word. Not mine."

Est looked at the tablet. At the draft press release. At the words mentorship and professional context and brand integrity.

"What would happen," Est said slowly, "if I didn't distance myself?"

Dana's pen stopped. The pen had been moving—small, unconscious circles on the corner of the notebook page, the fidget of a woman who was thinking faster than she was speaking. The pen stopped because the question required a different kind of attention.

"That depends on what you mean by didn't distance yourself."

"I mean—what if I said the photo was fine. What if I said Hong and I were at the same event and we stood next to each other and it was fine and the internet can think what it wants."

"The sponsors would be uncomfortable."

"And?"

"And some of them might reconsider their campaigns."

"And?"

"And you might lose a contract."

"And Hong?"

Dana looked at him. The look was long. The look was the look of a person who was witnessing something—a shift, a turning, a moment when a person who had been standing on a pedestal looked down and saw the distance to the ground and decided that the ground was where they wanted to be.

"Hong would be fine," Dana said. "Better than fine. The engagement on that photo is astronomical. If anything, the controversy has made both of you more visible. More interesting. The algorithm doesn't distinguish between admiration and outrage—it just counts the clicks."

"So the contamination is actually good for business."

"Commercially? Yes. The numbers don't lie. But commercially good and institutionally comfortable are not the same thing. The agency wants control. The photo represents a loss of control. That's what they're reacting to—not the image itself, but the fact that it happened without their permission."

Without their permission. The phrase echoed. It echoed because it was the phrase that governed Est's entire life—the life of permissions and approvals and contracts and clauses. The life where even his pleasures were contraband.

"Est." Dana's voice was gentle now, genuinely gentle—the voice of a person who was not managing a brand but caring for a human being. "Why does that matter to you? Hong. Why does protecting him matter?"

"Because I got him into this."

The words came out rough, unpolished—the real thing, slipping through the cracks of the marble, the authentic voice emerging from behind the turtleneck, raw and exposed and sounding nothing like the voice that did interviews and press conferences and brand activations.

"He was just trying to help me. He saw that I was suffocating at that party, and he pulled me out. And now he's going to be punished for it. Because of me. Because of my brand and my image and the fact that I can't exist in a photograph without it becoming a statement."

The word—statement—broke on the way out. Not dramatically. Quietly. The way a glass cracked when the temperature changed too fast.

Dana was quiet. For a long time—a Dana-length time, which was longer than most people's silences, because Dana understood that some silences were not empty but full, and the fullness needed space to breathe.

"The point is," she said finally, "protecting Hong doesn't have to mean sacrificing yourself. It can mean standing next to him. It can mean refusing to distance yourself."

"How?"

"It can mean going into that meeting upstairs and telling them exactly what you just told me. That Hong isn't a mistake. That you're not ashamed of being photographed with him. That the clash in branding they're so worried about is actually something worth exploring."

Est looked at the tablet. At the photograph. At his own face, marble and perfect and utterly, terrifyingly alone. At Hong's face—real, defiant, alive.

"They'll lose their minds." he said.

"Probably." Dana's smile widened—the smile of a woman who had survived fifteen years in an industry that consumed people and had emerged not cynical but strategic, not hardened but precise. "But I've seen you lose worse things. And you're still here."

The silence held. The glass walls of the conference room held. The light held—flat, corporate, the kind of light that made everyone look the same, the democratic, indiscriminate light of an institution that valued uniformity.

"I want to see him," Est said.

"Hong?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"Now."

Dana closed the notebook. The pen clicked—one click, decisive.

"I'll make the call."

An hour later, Est walked into a different conference room. Same glass walls. Same corporate light. Different people.

Dana. Seated. Notebook open. Pen ready. The composure fully deployed—the armor up, the professional exterior locked in place, the woman underneath visible only to the people who knew where to look.

P'Kwan. Hong's manager. Seated across from Dana. She was holding a pen. Not writing with it—holding it the way a person held a weapon, the pen as baton, as pointer, as the physical extension of an authority that was being questioned and therefore needed to be reasserted through objects.

Hong was in the chair beside P'Kwan.

He was leaning back. Not the performative lean of a person who was trying to look casual, but the genuine lean of a person who had been in enough meetings to know that sitting up straight was a concession to the room's expectations and that he was not in the business of making concessions.

He was wearing what he always wore—dark, distressed, the leather and the chains and the silver rings. The gray hair. The eyeliner—even now, even on a Monday morning, even in a glass-walled conference room in an agency that wanted him to be someone else. The eyeliner was there because the eyeliner was non-negotiable. The eyeliner was the line in the sand. The eyeliner said: this is where I stop compromising.

Their eyes met.

Hong's mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but something close to it. The twitch of a person who was recognizing a fellow prisoner in the yard, who was saying you too, huh with the specific, wordless, sardonic solidarity of people who shared an oppressor.

"I assume we all know why we're here." P'Kwan said. Her voice was sharp—not angry, but sharp, the voice of a woman who dealt in sharp things, whose professional life was conducted with edges.

"The photo," Hong said. His voice was flat. The Hong-flat. The specific register that

communicated I am here and I am listening and I am not going to give you anything.

"The photo," Kwan confirmed. "And the resulting discourse. Which has created complications for both of your brands."

"Complications," Hong repeated. He said the word the way a person tasted something they were considering spitting out—rolling it around, assessing, finding it inadequate.

"Don't," Kwan said, her voice sharpening further—a blade being honed. "Don't start with the sarcasm. Not today. The sponsors are concerned. The agency executives are concerned. There are questions being asked about judgment and professionalism and whether certain models—" her eyes flicked to Hong, the flick a movement of only millimeters but containing the full weight of accusation "—are suitable for prestige campaigns."

"Define suitable." Hong said.

"Hong." Kwan's voice was a warning. The warning of a person who was running out of patience and wanted the person she was warning to know it.

A silence.

"Est." P'Kwan turned. The pen moved with her, pointing now at Est the way it had pointed at Hong—the pen as compass, as weapon, as the physical instrument through which P'Kwan navigated the room. "Thank you for coming. We need to discuss the situation."

"They want a statement," P'Kwan said. She was not looking at Hong. She was looking at Est—the bigger asset, the higher-value target, the person whose brand was at risk and whose brand, in the agency's calculus, mattered more. The look was not hostile. It was strategic. The look of a person who was addressing the person who had the power to make the problem go away. "They want you to say it was a misunderstanding, or that you were just 'mentoring' a junior model. Something that contextualizes the photo and neutralizes the narrative."

"Mentoring." Est said. The word sat in his mouth like something he'd been asked to swallow and couldn't. The word was a capsule containing a lie, and the lie was designed to dissolve slowly, releasing its payload of false narrative into the bloodstream of public opinion.

"It's a clean frame," P'Kwan continued. Her voice was businesslike now—the business voice, the voice that solved problems not by addressing their causes but by managing their symptoms. "The senior model guiding the younger one. It explains the proximity without implying—"

"Without implying what?"

"Without implying that you're associated with him outside of professional contexts." P'Kwan said. Each word was placed precisely, the way a person placed items on a shelf they were afraid of breaking.

"Associated with him," Est repeated.

He looked at Hong. Hong was still leaning back. His eyes were watching Est with the specific, unblinking attention of a person who was waiting to see what would happen next and who had a very clear opinion about what should happen next but was disciplined enough to let the other person arrive there on their own.

"I mean—" P'Kwan started.

"No." Est said. "I'm not going to say it was a misunderstanding."

"Est—" P'Kwan began.

"Because it wasn't. We were at the same event. We stood next to each other. Someone took a photograph. That's what happened. That's the entire story. And I'm not going to rewrite it as a mentorship narrative to make the sponsors comfortable."

P'Kwan's pen stopped. The pen, which had been tapping—a small, rhythmic, authoritative tapping—was suddenly still.

"He's a liability, Est," P'Kwan said. The pen was pointing again—at Hong, the pen as weapon, the pen as accusation. "His image is too messy. He's dragging you down into this—"

"Excuse me."

Dana's voice. Quiet. Precise. The voice that cut through corporate noise the way a scalpel cut through tissue—not with force but with sharpness, the sharpness not aggressive but surgical, designed to separate what needed to be separated with minimum damage to the surrounding structure.

P'Kwan stopped.

"It sounds like you don't know how to do your job," Dana said.

P'Kwan's face changed. The sharpness in her expression converting into something harder, something that was not just professional but personal, the face of a woman whose competence had been questioned in front of her own client.

"Excuse me?"

"They just disappeared from a party," Dana continued. Her voice was calm—maddeningly calm, the calm of a person who understood that volume was the

enemy of authority and that the person who spoke softest in a room full of shouting was the person who controlled the room. "Two adults left a professional event early. That's not a scandal. That's a Saturday night. And you're acting like it's the end of the world."

"The sponsors—"

"The sponsors are worried about engagement metrics. The engagement metrics on that photo are through the roof. The photo has been seen by more people in forty-eight hours than Hong's entire portfolio has been seen in two years." Dana let the number land. The number was a weapon of its own—a weapon made of data rather than opinion, the kind of weapon that P'Kwan's emotional arguments could not parry.

"Let's use this," she said. "A photoshoot. Something that capitalizes on the virality. The 'Prince and Rebel' thing—it's already out there, it's already the narrative. Instead of fighting it, we own it."

She looked at P'Kwan. The look was not hostile. The look was the look of one professional addressing another—direct, respectful, and completely, utterly unwilling to yield.

"A yin and yang theme. Two opposing forces that form a whole. Light and dark. Structure and chaos. Whatever the creative team wants to call it. But we use the contrast, we don't erase it."

P'Kwan opened her mouth. Dana continued, because Dana was not finished, and when Dana was not finished, the conversation was not finished.

"They'll be together in the Valentine's Day promotional images anyway. The campaign already pairs them. The brand already chose them as a unit. This photo didn't create the association—it revealed it."

She closed the notebook. The pen clicked—one click, decisive, the period at the end of a paragraph.

"Let's use this and stop yelling already."

The silence that followed was different from the silence that had preceded the meeting.

"You're his manager," Dana said, looking at P'Kwan with the specific, focused, unblinking attention that she usually reserved for contract negotiations and client crises. "You're supposed to find him work and ensure his safety. Not yell at him over a damn viral photo on the internet."

P'Kwan's jaw tightened. The tightening was visible—a micro-expression, the involuntary contraction of a muscle that was being asked to hold back something

larger than itself.

"Fine," P'Kwan said. The word was flat—the flatness of a person who was conceding a battle, not a war. The concession was tactical, not philosophical. P'Kwan had not changed her mind. P'Kwan had calculated the odds and decided that this particular hill was not worth dying on. "One shoot. We'll discuss the concept with the creative team."

"Good," Dana said. "I think we're done here."

The meeting ended. The glass walls remained. The corporate light remained. But something in the room had shifted—the specific, almost imperceptible shift that happened when a person who had been treated as a product was treated, for a moment, as a person.

Est and Hong walked together.

The hallway was long, Dana had disappeared—melting into the building's machinery with the practiced efficiency of a woman who understood that her work was done and that the two people behind her needed to be left alone to process what had just happened.

They stopped at the cafeteria on the first floor. Est got a black coffee. Hong got something purple—an iced drink of indeterminate composition that matched his hair and his aesthetic and his general commitment to being visually inconsistent with his surroundings.

They sat at a corner table. The table was small—designed for two people, the geometry forcing proximity, the chairs close enough that Est could see the detail in Hong's silver rings and Hong could see the faint shadow beneath Est's eyes that the turtleneck couldn't cover.

"Sorry." Est said.

Hong looked up from his purple drink. The look was the flat look—the default look, the face that communicated nothing. But the eyes behind the look were different. The eyes were curious.

"For what?"

"I got you into trouble. For the photo. For—" Est gestured vaguely. The vagueness was deliberate—the gesture encompassing the meeting, the managers, the viral image, the internet's judgment, the entire, cascading, exponentially expanding consequence of two people standing next to each other at a party. "For all of it."

Hong took a sip of the purple drink. The sip was slow—the deliberate, unhurried sip

of a person who was formulating a response and was not going to rush it because the response mattered.

"You didn't get me into trouble," Hong said. "I got me into trouble. I scanned the payment. I put the wristband on you. I led you down the stairs. If anyone did the kidnapping, it was me."

"That's not—"

"P'Kwan has been looking for a reason to yell at me for months. You just gave her a convenient excuse." Hong put the drink down. The silver rings clicked against the cup. "She's been wanting to have this fight since the day she got assigned to me. The photo just gave her the ammunition."

"You should have told me your manager was crazy."

Hong's mouth twitched. The almost-smile. The closest thing to warmth that his face produced in public, the micro-expression that was the exterior evidence of a larger, hidden emotion.

"She's not crazy."

"She called you a liability."

"She implied I was a liability. There's a difference. Implication has plausible deniability." Hong paused. "She seems—"

"Difficult?" Est offered.

"She's not difficult. She's just disappointed. She thought she was getting a model, and she got me instead."

"What's the difference?"

"A model follows instructions. A model wears what they're told to wear and stands where they're told to stand and smiles when they're told to smile." Hong's voice was flat, but the flatness was different now—not defensive but descriptive, the flatness of a person who was stating facts rather than hiding behind them. "I do all of those things. But I also have opinions. And aesthetic preferences. And a tendency to wear leather vests to formal events because I think formal events are stupid."

"They are stupid," Est said.

"See?" Hong's smile widened—not the twitch, not the almost-smile, but the real thing, the rare thing, the smile that transformed his face from armor to architecture. "You get it. You get it because you've been to a thousand of them and you know they're stupid but you go anyway because the machinery requires it. But Kwan doesn't get it. She sees me as a problem to be managed rather than a person to be

worked with. She sees the gray hair and the eyeliner and the silver and she thinks this is a branding problem instead of thinking this is a person with an aesthetic and maybe the aesthetic is the brand."

"Your manager said she was trying to protect the agency's reputation."

"My manager was trying to protect her own comfort. There's a difference." Hong leaned back. The lean was his natural state—the body's default when the conversation was real, the posture of a person who was done performing and was simply existing. "She wants a model she can control. I'm not controllable. That's not my fault. That's hers."

"You should have told me," Est said. "About Kwan. About how she treats you. Before I went into that meeting, I should have known."

"It's not like I have your number." Hong said.

A smile flickered across his face—small, quick, the smile of a person who was making a point and enjoying the making.

"We met twice. At a party. And then a photo went viral and suddenly we're in emergency meetings with managers who want to kill each other."

The sentence was also an invitation. Not explicit. Est heard the invitation inside the sentence. The part of him that found beauty in things others overlook, that heard the note beneath the chord, the scent beneath the scent.

He pulled out his phone.

"Give me your number," he said. "So next time I can warn you before I ruin your career."

"My career was already ruined," Hong said, picking up the phone. His silver rings clicked against the screen as he typed—the sound small, metallic, the sound of a person who customized everything he touched and who was, in this moment, adding his contact information to Est's phone with the same deliberate, aesthetic intentionality with which he added silver studs to his boots. "You're just making it more interesting."

He handed the phone back. Est looked at the contact entry. Hong had added a small emoji next to his name—a skull. Of course. The skull was the most Hong thing possible—the aesthetic declaration, the tiny rebellion, the customization that said even your phone will know who I am.

"I need to text my friends and tell them I didn't get fired." Hong said, pulling out his own phone. The phone was in a case that had been customized—black leather, distressed, a small silver stud in the corner. The case was Hong in miniature: dark, textured, deliberately imperfect, bearing the marks of a life that was being lived

rather than preserved.

Est thought about the warehouse. The fire pit. The metal chairs. The people who had surrounded him with warmth and noise and the specific, unrehearsed, unperformative quality of being present with other human beings without an agenda.

"Tell them I said hi," Est said.

The sentence surprised him. It surprised him because it was simple—too simple for the complicated, overthinking, empathy-saturated, collector-hearted person that Est was. Tell them I said hi. The sentence of a normal person making a normal social gesture.

Hong looked up from his phone. The flat expression. But something behind it—the something that Est was beginning to recognize, the warmth that Hong carried beneath the armor the way he carried the peony tattoo beneath his clothes, hidden but permanent.

"You could tell them yourself."

"What?"

"Lego's show is Saturday. You should come."

Est almost smiled. The almost-smile was new—a development, a crack in the marble that he hadn't authorized, the face doing something the brain hadn't approved.

"I might," Est said.

"You should." Hong's voice softened. The softening was slight—a reduction in the flatness, a warming of the register, the vocal equivalent of a person uncrossing their arms. "They asked about you. After the party. They wanted to know if you were okay."

The sentence landed. It landed in the specific, undefended place where Est kept the things that mattered—the place where the crystal jar sat, the place where the rusted key and the blue pebble and the scrap of silk ribbon lived, the place where overlooked things were preserved because being overlooked was the thing that Est understood best and feared most.

They wanted to know if you were okay.

Not they wanted to know what happened. Not they wanted to know why you disappeared. Not they wanted gossip or information or content for the group chat. They wanted to know if he was okay. The question. The real question. The question that his parents' birthday texts never asked, that the agency never asked, that the

industry never asked because the industry did not care about okay, the industry cared about available and compliant and on-brand.

"You were pretty drunk." Hong added.

Est nodded slowly. The nod was the only response he could manage, because the alternative—the honest response, the response that would have been I was drunk and I went home with someone and I don't remember their face and the not-remembering is the thing that is keeping me awake at night—was too much. Too honest. Too vulnerable. Too far outside the factory settings.

The fear was still there—the fear of the unknown, the fear of the remembered-but-not-resolved, the fear of the body in his bed whose face wouldn't come into focus. But underneath the fear, something else was growing. Something that was not fear but its opposite—not courage, exactly, but curiosity. The collector's curiosity. The instinct that drove him to enter shops he hadn't entered yet, to open bottles he hadn't smelled yet, to reach for the overlooked things in the corners where nobody looked.

He was curious. He wanted more. Even though he felt like a thief stealing affection that wasn't meant for him—affection from strangers who had no obligation to care, who had no contract requiring their warmth, who had asked about him not because it was professional but because it was human.

"Saturday," Est said. "What time?"

Hong's mouth curved. The smile. The real one.

"I'll text you.".